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The Merge

In air combat, “the merge” occurs when opposing aircraft meet and pass each other. Then they usually “mix it up.” In a similar spirit, Air and Space Power Journal’s “Merge” articles present contending ideas. Readers can draw their own conclusions or join the intellectual battlespace. Please send comments to aspj@maxwell.af.mil.

Editor’s Note: As this issue of ASPJ went to press, the secretary of the Air Force announced that “beginning with the calendar year 2008 central selection boards, information on all degrees earned by an officer will be available to the board.”

The Vanishing Education (Record) of an Officer

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FOR YEARS, POSSESSING an advanced degree had a significant impact on an Air Force officer’s promotion potential. In January 2005, however, the Air Force took steps to change that mind-set. New Air Force policy states that “advanced academic degrees will no longer be a factor in the promotion process.”¹ First and foremost, the Air Force introduced a new, businesslike, “just-in-time” force-development approach that seeks to tailor education to current job needs. Key to that new policy is a changed educational paradigm: if officers need additional education or training for their jobs, the Air Force will arrange it—and they will get it.

Coincidentally, the Department of Defense (DOD) is gradually shifting to a new education policy of its own. The department realizes that if the United States is to prevail against jihadist extremists and other terrorists, then far greater understanding of different human behavioral patterns, cultures, politics, histories, languages, and religions becomes essential.² To fight the continuing global war on terrorism, the Pentagon has begun to transform its relatively broad education policy to focus more on these “soft” disciplines and push especially hard to develop linguists.³ For the Air Force, these changes suggest that the expertise of a culturally savvy foreign-area specialist fluent in a particular language could one day influence the course and direction of an air campaign, which in turn could help save American, coalition, or civilian lives.

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Air Force Policy Not Optimal for the Broader DOD Approach

In the meantime, the new Air Force policy does not optimally complement the larger, broader DOD approach. Just-in-time thinking fits today's technology-driven Air Force, particularly for junior officers learning and maintaining skills in their early operational assignments. But the same approach does not lend itself to the kind of long-term commitment needed for officers to develop diplomatic acumen in politics, culture, history, and language. Such a commitment may even extend to recruitment based on a candidate's undergraduate studies. Air Force leaders may want to reconsider the service's new policy and thereby resynchronize with broader DOD objectives.

Right now, the Air Force intends to change the focus of its education and training to deliberate, targeted development with the goal of tailoring and providing education and training at an appropriate time, thus enhancing Airmen's job performance. For instance, if an officer needs a computer-science degree to become an information-warfare officer, then the Air Force will arrange for the appropriate schooling. Similarly, officers scheduled to work at a system program office may require a management degree. But tailor-made career development becomes more difficult when one tries to match appropriate education to an increasing number and variety of political-military jobs that demand long lead times to learn languages, cultures, and histories, as well as understand current events in the proper context. One can acquire such relevant, required skills only over the long run—likely beginning with undergraduate programs and recruitment.

Change Manifested at Promotion Boards

In January 2005, the Air Force removed all information regarding academic education, including bachelor's degrees, from promotion-board records of line officers through the rank of colonel. This information will not be visible at any level of the process, whether rater, senior rater, management, or promotion board. Such policy follows from the Air Force's newly declared emphasis on "job performance" as the overriding determinant of promotion potential.⁴

To explain the changes even further, Air Force policy and press guidance cite examples showing how perceptions of "filling squares" or "checking boxes" drive pressures supposedly associated with obtaining an advanced degree for promotion potential and career enhancement. Air Force leaders publicly expressed their concerns that merely obtaining the degree superseded learning itself or the effective use of that learning, whether during one's next assignment or over the course of a career.⁵ Because this author had a different experience with selecting a degree program, he was surprised (but not shocked) that the Air Force decided to change policy in the midst

of the current global war on terrorism, which places cultural, historical, and linguistic differences front and center.

Many officers purposefully choose undergraduate majors and graduate-degree programs such as international affairs, national security studies, and military history (many completed via “night school”) to complement their vocational calling. Those degrees and programs offer excellent support and preparation for tours in political-military and public-policy-related assignments as well as provide a foundation of knowledge for careers in the military. Nevertheless, under the new Air Force policy, those degrees and academic achievements vanish from the promotion record and become invisible to board members.⁶

Frankly, it is reasonable for Air Force promotion boards to differentiate among competing officers based on the usefulness of their academic credentials to the military, no matter how they obtained the degrees. Boards could also judge officers’ potential by reviewing both the rigor of their studies and their academic standing. Further, education plays an important role in preparation for greater responsibility—a factor worthy of consideration by a promotion board. Appropriate academic achievements reinforce whether or not officers’ development meets Air Force needs and makes them candidates for future positions. Like traditional professions (e.g., law and medicine), the military should stress educational accomplishments and preparation when it considers a person for promotion and increased responsibility.

Given two officers with equally impressive job performance (which is the norm), ideally the next A5 (Plans, Programs, and Policy) for one of the regional major commands (e.g., US Air Forces in Europe or Pacific Air Forces) would have expertise in regional affairs. Similarly, the Air Force should select as its next defense attaché to a country of critical importance to US foreign policy someone who speaks the local language fluently and possesses an area-studies degree for the region (if not that country), rather than a generalist who majored in forestry, took the obligatory Spanish course in college, but excelled (for example) as an aviator, a maintainer, or a logistician in early operational jobs. If educational achievements vanish from promotion records, such important distinctions could be lost early in an officer’s career progression when assignments (and evaluations) focus more on operations-related vocational skills.

Linguists and International Affairs Specialists

Promotion boards aside, two other factors will also exert influence on the Air Force: the DOD’s efforts to increase the US military’s foreign language skills and the Air Force’s own new initiative to develop international-affairs specialists.⁷ A recent Pentagon report notes that “‘language skill and regional expertise have not been regarded as warfighting skills and are not sufficiently incorporated into operational or contingency planning.’” It also points out that the ability of US troops to communicate in and understand

foreign cultures has become “‘as important as critical weapons systems.’”⁸ A measure still under consideration goes so far as to require that an officer understand a foreign language—possibly even test as bilingual. The DOD has mandated that the Air Force, along with the other services, conduct detailed planning for managing and monitoring the career progression of these individuals.

Moreover, the Air Force is expanding its own initiative to develop international-affairs specialists. Service guidance explains that for an “expeditionary Air Force” to “continue . . . success far from home,” the service will have to “develop a cadre . . . with international insight, foreign language proficiency, and cultural understanding—Airmen who have the right skill sets to understand the specific regional context in which air and space power may be applied.” These skills are deemed force multipliers for the effective application of air and space power.⁹

However, the proverbial “long pole in that tent” is that education in these soft subjects does not lend itself to quick fixes or the just-in-time delivery mode to develop officers competent in those areas. Only a long-term commitment, beginning in the undergraduate years and continuing through postgraduate education, can fully develop and nurture this type of officer. Admittedly, such a commitment will challenge the Air Force, particularly as it educates junior officers whose first priority is to learn and become proficient in a vocational-technical skill in their early assignments. Some officers will do this as a well-managed, career-broadening opportunity to gain experience in international political-military affairs. However, for a designated number of officers, the Air Force envisions an even more ambitious program to develop international-affairs specialists with multiple assignments designed to create a true regional expert with professional language skills—the regional-affairs strategist. Candidates for this program will have undergraduate degrees and a personal interest in these disciplines.

Another Approach

One finds a precedent among the great captains of the American military for a force-development approach that does not erase academic achievements from an officer’s promotion-board record but in fact emphasizes their importance. For example, Gen George Patton owned a substantial personal library of hundreds of volumes (which he actually read) dedicated to military affairs and history. The last two evaluation (performance) reports of General Patton during his interwar assignment in Hawaii commended him as an individual “widely read in military history” and a “student of military affairs . . . intensely interested in his profession.”¹⁰

Many Airmen would quickly carp that today’s officers lack the time available to Patton’s generation for personal study. Regardless of such differences, were Patton living today, he would persevere—he would make time for personal study just as he did over his military career of more than 40 years. His

professional military development and maturation rested solidly on three pillars—self-study, the US Army’s educational system, and on-the-job experience. Patton’s superiors recognized him for achievements in all three areas. If Patton were in today’s Air Force, however, a promotion board would dismiss his extensive self-study, emphasize job performance in his less-than-dynamic interwar environment, and marginally consider his formal education.

More Visibility on Education, Not Less

Particularly for a calling such as the profession of arms, education is a career-long, if not lifelong, commitment. The Air Force’s decision to shift to a just-in-time delivery policy for education and training, along with the erasure of educational accomplishments from promotion records, myopically focuses on the officer’s specific job at hand. Further, the new approach may not allow needed visibility over the long-term grooming of officers, for the service not only will place them in challenging, diplomatically sensitive coalition and allied positions, but also will expect them to convey confidence and savvy in politics, cultures, and languages. Understandably, the payoff of an education rich in such disciplines may not come until those officers become senior commanders. However, the rewards could prove disproportionately large in a critical international contingency.

If anything, perhaps the Air Force needs to place greater emphasis on educational development, given the political-military, nuance-driven international security environment in which it operates. The service would do well to restore—or conceivably increase—the visibility of an officer’s academic achievements to his or her promotion record, even to the point of allowing supervisors and raters to formally make note of academic achievements, self-study, professional writing, language proficiency, and other related activities on annual performance reports and promotion recommendations.

Next Steps

Current Air Force policy guidance clearly indicates that officers—on their own—can still earn degrees. Assistance, such as benefits from the Veterans Administration, remains available, and education offices will continue to counsel prospective students on their options. However, the current sanctioned aversion to the recognition of advanced degrees is chilling for prospective students and junior officers who require long-term commitments for professional development in those soft disciplines now so critical to national security. Instead, the Air Force should provide promotion boards guidance that allows them to recognize academic achievements clearly beneficial to the military and to the development of a professional military officer.

In his *Chief’s Sight Picture* of 2 February 2005, Gen John Jumper, former Air Force chief of staff, stated that “the goal is clear—develop professional Airmen who will collectively leverage their respective strengths to accom-

plish the Air Force mission. . . . We owe it to you to provide the skills and education you need to continue to excel!”¹¹ All Air Force members would agree with General Jumper’s assertion; however, one must remember that military officers begin to obtain those skills and education before they receive their commissions and that their professional development extends over the course of an entire career. The military profession is no different from traditional professions in this regard. Therefore, once obtained, and without bias regarding venue or timing, the educational achievements of a professional military officer should appear in plain sight for all to see—and evaluate. In the current national security environment, which demands practical know-how and expertise in the soft disciplines of culture, history, language, politics, and religion, the Air Force should restore emphasis to educational accomplishments on individual performance reports and for consideration by line-officer promotion boards. □

Washington, DC

Notes

1. Gen John Jumper, “Force Development: Changing the Education Mindset,” *Chief’s Sight Picture*, 2 February 2005, <http://www.af.mil/library/viewpoints/csaf.asp?id=130>.
2. “Tongue Tied,” editorial, *Wall Street Journal*, 29 April 2005.
3. Bradley Graham, “Pentagon to Stress Foreign Languages,” *Washington Post*, 8 April 2005, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A35263-2005Apr7.html> (accessed 25 October 2005).
4. Jumper, “Force Development.”
5. Harlan Ullman, “Educate the Military,” *Washington Times*, 13 April 2005.
6. Headquarters Air Mobility Command, A1 (Personnel), PowerPoint slide for weekly “A-Staff” meeting, February 2005. Air Force-wide guidance to the major commands contained detailed instructions on prohibiting certain comments regarding the completion of or enrollment in professional military education or advanced academic education programs on both officer performance reports and promotion recommendation forms.
7. For an extensive discussion of the challenges the Air Force faces in developing greater foreign-language proficiency within the service, see Col John L. Conway III, USAF, retired, “The View from the Tower of Babel: Air Force Foreign Language Posture for Global Engagement,” *Air and Space Power Journal* 19, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 57–69.
8. Quoted in Graham, “Pentagon to Stress Foreign Languages.”
9. Gen John Jumper, “Officer Force Development: International Affairs Specialists,” *Chief’s Sight Picture*, 6 April 2005, <http://www.af.mil/library/viewpoints/csaf.asp?id=129>.
10. Steve E. Dietrich, “The Professional Reading of General George S. Patton, Jr.,” *Journal of Military History* 53, no. 4 (October 1989): 406.
11. Jumper, “Force Development.”